

Strabo. Human Sacrifices and Severed Heads: Cliché or Historical Reality?

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Abstract: *Strabo's account of human sacrifices is anachronistic, especially when we consider that they are not exceptional cases related to warfare or examples of natural selection within each community. The severed heads are really figures associated with ancestors that accompanied their festive celebrations.*

The references to the immolation of human victims are not the result of any misrepresentation but the attribution of practices, already obsolete when Strabo writes, to the northern Hispanic populations in the context of his overall description of their organisation, considered to be barbaric.

Rezumat: *Relatarea lui Strabon despre sacrificiile umane este anacronică, mai ales dacă luăm în considerare că acestea nu sunt cazuri excepționale legate de războaie sau exemple de selecție naturală în cadrul fiecărei comunități. Capetele tăiate sunt de fapt figuri asociate cu strămoșii, care însoțeau sărbătorile lor festive. Referințele la imolarea victimelor umane nu sunt rezultatul unei interpretări greșite, ci atribuirea unor practici, deja depășite în momentul în care scrie Strabon, populațiilor din nordul Hispaniei, în contextul descrierii sale generale asupra organizării lor, considerate barbare.*

Keywords: Remembrance of Ancestors; Initiation Festivals; Rites of Passage; Iberians, Lusitanians.

Introduction

Traditionally, it has been considered that, from Strabo's reports, based on references by earlier authors such as Diodorus of Sicily (who lived between the 90s and 30s) and, above all, the multi-talented Posidonius (who lived between 135 and 51), in both cases with occasional allusions to this type of practice, ritual sacrifices would be celebrated by the populations of the north of the Iberian Peninsula, whose victims would include human beings.

In the following pages we will examine whether these accounts coincide with the time when Strabo wrote his work, or if instead they are a cliché that has nothing to do with the historical phase (the first decades of the first century CE) in which the author refers to the initial years of Roman presence in north-western Hispania.

And finally, we will analyse the meaning of a number of archaeological pieces that have been known since their appearance as "severed heads", in an attempt to connect them with the cultural and cultic reality that is linked to these communities; from our perspective, it is

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perhaps more appropriate to use the expression "detached heads", thereby avoiding the cruel (and even bloody) implications that seem to accompany the first of these adjectives.

Ritual sacrifices with human victims in the Iberian Peninsula

News of the festive celebrations among the northern Iberian communities, bearing in mind that these celebrations had an obvious religious component at their base, are mainly due to Strabo in Book III of his Geography, and are briefly completed by the annotations of other ancient writers, although none of them mentions the annual cycle in which they took place, making it impossible to specify a calendar in this respect.

Among these accounts, the most outstanding concerns the performance of ritual sacrifices, a mixture of festive and cult celebrations, in which animals were immolated (in the public square) in large numbers and in the celebration of which all the members of each settlement would take part³:

Ἄπαντες δ' οἱ ὄρειοι λιτοί, ὕδροπόται, χαμαιεῦναι, βαθεῖαν κατακεχυμένοι τὴν κόμην γυναικῶν δίκην, μιτρωσάμενοι δὲ τὰ μέτωπα μάχονται. τραγοφαγοῦσι δὲ μάλιστα, καὶ τῷ Ἄρει τράγον θύουσι καὶ τοὺς αἰχμαλώτους καὶ ἵππους ποιοῦσι δὲ καὶ ἑκατόμβας ἑκάστου γένους Ἑλληνικῶς (ed. Radt).

“All the inhabitants of the mountains are sober: they drink water, sleep on the ground and let their hair grow long like women, but in combat they gird their foreheads with a sash. They eat mostly goat meat and sacrifice goats in honour of Ares as well as prisoners and horses. They even make hecatombs of every kind of victim in the Greek manner.”

As can be seen, this account does not offer a complete description of the performance of such sacrifices, although the reference to "hecatombs" in the sense of the abundance of animals involved in the offerings may lead us to think that the festivity would only take place once a year.

On the other hand, the question arises as to the identity of those who would direct these immolations. In this respect, there is nothing to prevent us from thinking that those in charge of the immolations could be identified with individuals belonging to an embryonic priestly structure, in no way comparable to the level of the druids of Gaul, although there would probably have been a priestly organization similar to that of other populations not far from the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula, such as the Lusitanians⁴. Therefore, the aim is to explore whether these intermediaries between their communities and the world of the divine had come to organise themselves as a singular institution in the centuries before the Roman invasion.

³ STRABO 3.3.7.

⁴ cf. STRABO 3.3.6 and MARCO 1999.

Supporters of this possibility rely on a series of literary texts⁵, while detractors consider that these testimonies do not refer to priests in the strict sense but to augurs, which would not confirm their professionalisation. In this sense, the absence of druids in Celtic Spain would be due to the fact that groups of Central European origin would not be the majority among the northern populations, and therefore would not impose their customs on the rest of the inhabitants of the primitive centres of population⁶.

This is why it is argued that the absence of the monarchical institution among Central European populations that were not predominant in the Northwest would make the presence of a priesthood with all its prerogatives difficult, without forgetting that this situation may have taken root more widely in the more Celticised regions of the Peninsula⁷.

In each centre of population there would be a person invested with special powers, who would supervise the places of worship and the performance of sacrifices and prophecies, and thus they would have an occasional priesthood, but not a professional one as in the case of the Druids. It is possible that if the ancient sources do not mention such an institution among the northern peoples, it is perhaps because these functions would be masked in other local institutions, i.e. people who would accumulate religious functions alongside political ones⁸. Therefore, these tasks would have been in the hands of those who held the hierarchy in each village (public cults) or of the heads of each family group (private cults). However, it should not be overlooked that references to public cults are very scarce, while we know nothing about private cults, because the ancient documentation overlooks the sacred cycles and the dates when public festivals were celebrated. Among the functions of the priests (and officiants of the cults) would be divinatory practices, in which women would play a certain role as priestesses.

In any case, these personalities would be identified with those who held the highest positions in the leadership of the village, who, according to Strabo⁹, during the celebration of social and political feasts, sat on the benches built around the walls according to their age and dignity¹⁰.

Severed heads

The festive manifestations of these "highlanders" (with their immolations and banquets) would include those known as human sacrifices which, according to the Greek geographer, would be offered to the divinities (Ares), as well as the representations of "severed heads", which appeared with a certain profusion in Celtiberian Hispania: in Asturias, in fact, apart from

⁵ cf. FLORUS 1.33.13, STRABO 3.3.6 and SILIUS ITALICUS, *Punica* 3.344.

⁶ LAMBRINO 1965, 224.

⁷ BLÁZQUEZ 1983, 227-228.

⁸ URRUELA 1981, 258-261.

⁹ STRABO 3.3.7.

¹⁰ SANTOS 2014.

the anthropomorphism of some funerary inscriptions, we have those found in San Chuis de Allande, as well as in Baldornón and Deva (local council of Gijón).

Sporadic reports by ancient authors, referring to ritual sacrifices, together with the presence of divinatory activity among these communities, especially among those in the interior of the peninsula¹¹, to which we should possibly add some archaeological remains of a zoomorphic nature, as well as the iconography of certain epigraphic documents, will help us to understand the type of victims who were sacrificed.

Classical writers occasionally allude to human sacrifices and mention the simultaneous presence of animals in these sacrifices. Although the presence of humans among the victims has been considered a certainty, we believe that it should be questioned, as it is a cliché that was used with some frequency in ancient literature. Indeed, these sacrifices are included in literary descriptions of a derogatory nature, applicable to communities as disparate as the Iberians, Scythians, Germanic, Gauls, Phoenicians, Egyptians..., or any others considered barbarians¹².

As an example, here is a testimony in Diodorus of Sicily regarding the heads of the enemy in combat¹³:

τῶν δὲ πεσόντων πολεμίων τὰς κεφαλὰς ἀφαιροῦντες περιάπτουσι τοῖς ἀρχέσι τῶν ἵππων: ... τῶν δ' ἐπιφανεστάτων πολεμίων κεδρώσαντες τὰς κεφαλὰς ἐπιμελῶς τηροῦσιν ἐν λάρνακι, καὶ τοῖς ξένοις ἐπιδεικνύουσι σεμνυνόμενοι διότι τῆσδε τῆς κεφαλῆς τῶν προγόνων τις ἢ πατήρ ἢ καὶ αὐτὸς πολλὰ χρήματα διδόμενα οὐκ ἔλαβε. φασὶ δὲ τινὰς αὐτῶν καυχᾶσθαι διότι χρυσὸν ἀντίσταθμον τῆς κεφαλῆς οὐκ ἐδέξαντο βάρβαρόν τινα μεγαλοψυχίαν ἐπιδεικνύμενοι (ed. Casevitz).

“They cut off the heads of their fallen enemies and hang them around the necks of their horses..... Of their most distinguished enemies they embalm the heads in cedar oil and keep them carefully in a chest, and show them to visitors, boasting that for this head one of their ancestors or their father or the individual himself did not accept the offer of a large sum of money. It is even said that some of them boasted that they had not accepted the weight of the head in gold, showing a certain barbaric grandeur of spirit”.

This same descriptive line (including literary and content parallels) is found in Strabo, who used as a reference (as he mentions in his account) Posidonius, whose writing seems to correspond to almost a century earlier:

¹¹ BLÁZQUEZ 1983, 232-238.

¹² v.gr. CLAVEL-LEVÉQUE 1974.

¹³ DIODORUS OF SICILY 5.29.4-5.

τὸ ἀπὸ τῆς μάχης ἀπιόντας τὰς κεφαλὰς τῶν πολεμίων ἐξάπτειν ἐκ τῶν ἀυχένων τῶν ἵππων, κομίσαντας δὲ προσπατταλεύειν τοῖς προφυλαίοις. φησὶ γοῦν Ποσειδώνιος αὐτὸς ἰδεῖν τὴν θεάν ταύτην πολλαχοῦ, καὶ τὸ μὲν πρῶτον ἀηδίζεσθαι, μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα φέρειν πρῶως διὰ τὴν συνήθειαν. τὰς δὲ τῶν ἐνδόξων κεφαλὰς κεδροῦντες ἐπεδείκνυον τοῖς ξένοις, καὶ οὐδὲ πρὸς ἰσοστάσιον χρυσὸν ἀπολυτροῦν ἤξιουν. καὶ τούτων δ' ἔπαυσαν αὐτοὺς Ῥωμαῖοι καὶ τῶν κατὰ τὰς θυσίας καὶ μαντείας ὑπεναντίων τοῖς παρ' ἡμῖν νομίμοις (ed. Radt)¹⁴.

“When they leave the battle they tie the heads of their enemies to the necks of their horses, take them home and hang them on a nail in their doorways. Posidonius at least claims to have seen this himself in many places and that at first he was repulsed by it, but afterwards he endured it calmly by force of habit. The heads of the most reputed of them they preserved in cedar oil and showed them to their guests, and would not deign to grant their ransom even for their weight in gold. And the Romans made them cease from this, as well as from sacrifices and oracles contrary to our customs.”

What is described here is nothing more than the presence of the heads of enemies as war trophies among the victorious warriors, something common to many ancient peoples¹⁵ and which would correspond to a period prior to the arrival of the Romans, since Diodorus writes around the middle of the 1st century BC, so it is not surprising that Strabo, who would transmit his news at least half a century later, has resorted to a reference, perhaps confused and anachronistic, to the existence of human sacrifices in the immolations which would almost exclusively have consisted of male goats and horses¹⁶, sometimes together with other animals and offerings.

From the above passage it appears that the practices connected with ritual sacrifices would not conceal anything special, except for the barbaric character of the kind of victims immolated by including human victims (these would be cases in which captives would always be involved) together with animals instead of referring only to the latter¹⁷. In any case, we must not forget that these were warrior communities, whose bellicose character would be manifested, when necessary, although they would not often have a sufficient number of prisoners to offer to the divinity (presumably the god of war).

In his description, Strabo¹⁸ mentions that, earlier, Plutarch¹⁹ refers to the prohibition of the Lusitanians to perform human sacrifices together with animals (horses) when formalising

¹⁴ STRABO 4.4.5.

¹⁵ Similar to the fate of Leonidas, whose hands and head would have been cut off by the Persians, HERODOTUS 7.238; cf. also PECHATNOVA 2022, 341; SAZONOV, TÖYRÄÄNVUORI 2021, 343.

¹⁶ STRABO 3.3.7.

¹⁷ STRABO 3.3.6-7; cf. MARCO 1999.

¹⁸ STRABO 3.3.6.

¹⁹ PLUTARCH, MOR. 82.283.

their pacts and divining the future, which would be accompanied by the performance of divinatory practices among these populations; This is in line with what was already legislated by the Roman administration (in the time of Publius Crassus, governor of Hispania Ulterior, around 96-94) regarding the abandonment of such practices in the territory of the *Bletonesii* (the inhabitants of *Bletisa*, modern-day Ledesma in the province of Salamanca).

Given that such references do not constitute a sufficient basis to corroborate the presence of human sacrifices²⁰, it could be thought that the existence of some archaeological remains linked to them would make them much more credible: thus those known since the last century as "severed heads", found in significant numbers in the peninsula and in Celtic Europe, would seem to form a more solid argument.

Contemporary historiography does not present a uniform interpretation of the meaning of these sculptural figures: for Blázquez²¹ the connection between these heads and human sacrifices is unquestionable, although he admits that most of these pieces cannot be called "severed heads" and are eventually assigned a funerary meaning.

It has been pointed out that their sphere of expansion would have been limited to the Celtic area of the Peninsula, while those corresponding to movable art would have a greater dispersion and a funerary-religious significance (or perhaps simply decorative, as occurs with the front section of granaries or *teitos* in the region of Asturias, such as in the marsh of La Pornacal in the council of Somiedo, although they are also found on the doors and roofs of some buildings in the north of Extremadura, connected to the territory of the Vettones and the granite sculptures of *verracos*). Consequently, such manifestations could be found within the framework of religious rituals of Indo-European origin, related to some agrarian or chthonic god, which can be identified with Ares/Mars²².

However, we do consider that there is no reason to believe that these sculptures from the Celtic religious world confirm the performance of human sacrifices, but rather that they would be part of the so-called ethic of honour, deeply rooted among Iberian populations of Indo-European origin, where these practices would not only take place in the course of banquets but also of fights of all kinds, including ritual and religious dances²³. In any case, it is possible that the sacrificial victims, especially the animals, would parade in costume to the place of their immolation, which would take place in a sacred enclosed space, where the offerings would be incinerated immediately afterwards²⁴. And in this religious-festive context, it should be remembered that the meat of the sacrificed victims would be quickly eaten by the participants in these ceremonies, identified with the faithful present, in fact the whole community.

²⁰ BERMEJO 1986, 88-93.

²¹ BLÁZQUEZ 1958.

²² LÓPEZ MONTEAGUDO 1987, 252.

²³ MARCO 1991, 97 ss.

²⁴ BLÁZQUEZ 1991, 127-129

Do we have any indication of these ritual sacrifices in the cultural and cultic context of the pre-Roman communities in the north of the Iberian Peninsula? No material evidence of such offerings to the gods has been found, although it is possible that the situation is different in relation to the funerary environment; We may therefore have to accept that what Strabo transmits to us is only the existence of ritual human sacrifices, including the accompaniment to the grave and the exceptional offering in the case of children, thus identifying only with rituals rooted among some indigenous communities up to Roman times²⁵.

As for animal sacrifice, which is profusely described in ancient literary documentation, a number of archaeological and epigraphic testimonies define it: the most characteristic sacrifices of the Indo-European world would involve the slaughter of suids (or caprids), as well as sheep and cattle (forming a kind of *suovetaurilia*), and, in the case of northern peoples, horses. If we take into account the organisation of these communities, where there would have been a predominance of bovids over suids, it is easy to suppose that the animals that would have taken part in these rituals would have mainly been bovids. In isolated cases, pigs may have been the object of these sacrifices, as well as some wild boar, although at no time can this situation be compared with what happened among the Vettones²⁶.

However, in contrast to what would happen in other pre-Roman regions of the Douro Valley (including the "verracos"²⁷ [boars]), we do not have such a large number of zoomorphs that would lead us to think one way or the other; moreover, some of these sculptures may have to be linked to rites of immolation and consecration, in which the real victim would sometimes be replaced by a stone, wood or ceramic carving²⁸, accompanied by all types of offerings (and something similar would happen with regard to the presence of the "severed heads"). As far as zoomorphic representations in Asturias are concerned, we only have a bovid head discovered in Oviedo in the early 1970s during the redevelopment of the Plaza de Santo Domingo, which could be connected to the representation of "verracos"²⁹.

In the light of what we have seen and in other terms, is it not possible that zoomorphic figures ("verracos", bovids, etc.) in stone (or in other materials) may have fulfilled the same function as substitute elements for live animals, at least on some occasions??

The remembrance of ancestors and the feast of the dead

Along with the celebrations linked to the divinities protecting the acts of daily life connected with the annual cycle of the basic economic sectors (sowing, harvesting, reaping, harvesting, harvesting of fruits...), several others arose that were connected with the gods of

²⁵ FERNÁNDEZ, LÓPEZ 1990, 105.

²⁶ SAYAS, LÓPEZ 1991, 108-109.

²⁷ vid. DIEGO SANTOS 1965.

²⁸ LÓPEZ MONTEAGUDO 1989, 144-145.

²⁹ ESCORTELL 1973.

the underworld, as well as with the funerary cults linked to the beliefs in the afterlife and the meaning of the sky and the stars that welcomed the deceased in the afterlife³⁰.

We have mentioned the possibility that the ancestors of the inhabitants of the hill forts took part in the celebration of the ritual sacrifices through representations of their faces (heads), mainly made of stone; this leads us to consider that, in this framework of transversality typical of the festive celebrations among the northern communities around the years of the change of era, and although some of them would remain in force in Roman times, the connection with the afterlife is evident. We have thus discovered the relationship between horses as psychopomps (companions of the soul of the deceased) and the sun and the world beyond the grave³¹, while the disc-shaped stelae may have served as a reference point for the location of the cemeteries (necropolises) of each of the settlements, constituting another example of the celebrations associated with the sun.

For this reason, it comes as no surprise that, already in the centuries of Roman presence, as a reminder of an earlier period, funerary tombstones have been discovered in north-eastern Spain whose epitaph is inscribed in a solar disc, no doubt as a representation of the place where the deceased was received in the afterlife: we refer to that of Bovecio, found in Collía (Parres), enclosed in the recess of a circular support (stone), comparable to an oikomorphic inscription³².

There are also others, whose head is identified with a solar disc and the figure of the deceased: in Asturias, those of Molleda (Corvera de Asturias) and Selorio (Villaviciosa) stand out, although the upper part (the pediment of the figurative house) has been replaced by the physiognomic features of the face, resulting in a very weak and imprecise outline³³.

The similarity of this iconography with the severed heads (that of San Chuis de Allande, or those of Baldornón and Deva) leads us to hypothesise that the latter pieces may have had a direct relationship with the funerary world and, therefore, may have been present during the celebration of the great ritual banquets mentioned by Strabo, undoubtedly tinged by a familiar character by reducing their sphere of action to the framework of the village and its inhabitants, albeit without being considered as sacrificial victims but simply as symbols for the remembrance of the ancestors.

Some of the most deeply rooted popular traditions in a number of villages on the Castilian plateau, until the first decades of the second half of the last century, on the days around the feast of the dead, included the custom of placing pumpkins at crossroads, after scraping them out and placing candles inside them, an action which can be interpreted as an act of remembrance towards the deceased.

³⁰ for further details, see SANTOS 2021b.

³¹ SANTOS 2011.

³² SANTOS 2016; DIEGO SANTOS 1985, 183.

³³ for further examples see SANTOS 2023.

These pumpkins, simulating the most basic features of a human head (nose, mouth and eyes, similar to those depicted in the inscriptions), would perhaps allude to protection or have an apotropaic character. The precedent of this pagan tradition, and its association with roads, is what Saint Martin of Dumio refers to as early as the sixth century when he mentions the lighting of candles at crossroads as a ‘devil’s culture’, the aim of which was simply to provide a framework of security³⁴:

Et quomodo aliqui ex vobis, qui abrenuntiaverunt diabolo et angelis eius et culturis eius et operibus eius malis, modo iterum ad culturas diaboli revertuntur? Nam ad petras et ad arbores et ad fontes et per trivias cereolos incendere, quid est aliud nisi cultura diaboli?

“And how is it that some of you, who have renounced the devil and his angels and his cults and his evil deeds, now return once again to the cults of the devil? For to light candles by the stones, by the trees, by the fountains, and at the crossroads, what is it but devil worship?”

Within this context, the “severed heads” would have been associated with this cult of the dead, which would also have led to the appearance of anthropomorphic figures on certain stelae³⁵. The hypothetical wooden heads could not have contained candles, as they are easily inflammable materials, but would the ceramic ones be the immediate ancestor of today’s carnival masks? In this respect, one may ask whether these anthropomorphic figures sought the rebirth of the spirit of the ancestors, as well as their support and help, and perhaps the answer is yes.

Given that this custom remained almost unchanged throughout the medieval and modern centuries, the Catholic Church, while syncretising these pagan practices, which seem to date back to pre-Roman times in the religious-festive context of the populations of the north of the Iberian Peninsula, would assimilate the feast of the dead by merging it with that dedicated to all the saints, while at the same time making the celebration of both of them on similar dates. There are those who still remember a cenotaph being erected in the centre of the churches in memory of the dead, known as a “monument” (connecting with the inscriptions on Latin stelae, which began with the funerary formula *D.M.M.P. = D(iis) M(anibus) m(onumentum) p(ositum)*), as can be seen, for example, on the epitaph of Cantia (Coráin, Cangas de Onís)³⁶: *D(iis) M(anibus) M(onumentum)/ pos(uit) Tere(ntius) fili/ (a)e su(a)e Cant(iae) an(n)/ orum XV sit tibi/ ter(r)a leves(levis).*

³⁴ SAINT MARTIN OF DUMIO, *De correctione rusticorum* 16.

³⁵ SANTOS 2019.

³⁶ Included in CIL II.5742.

The initiation festival of the young warriors

Against the background of this festive tradition amongst the populations that inhabited the north of the peninsula, and possibly in connection with the celebration of sacrifices and banquets with a ritualistic meaning, do we have evidence of initiatory practices identified with forms of induction or transition to adulthood? And would these types of activities not also draw on the memory of the ancestors, by seeking their protection and guidance through their 'presence' in the severed heads?

The association of cave-like constructions with sanctuaries containing fonts or basins gives them a chthonic quality, making them a point of union between the celestial sphere and the afterlife: the ritual function of these centres seems to be related to rites of purification and initiation, associated with the protection of the social group; it was thought that these enclaves could be identified with the structures known as 'hillfort saunas', although in reality they seem to correspond to simple baths built in the area of the settlements in the north of the peninsula, which have been completely catalogued by Ríos, including the last of these thermal structures discovered in the Galician enclosure known as the *Castelón de Castañoso*³⁷. The meaning and function of these structures are debated and there is a diversity of opinions among researchers, who seem to lean towards an initiatory purpose, although this is not so evident³⁸.

These baths, with a varied typology and intended for quite functional purposes³⁹, have been considered as 'saunas', especially for other regions of the Celtic world of the Peninsula, and are considered to coincide with places where rites of initiation were celebrated⁴⁰. However, it is more plausible that we are once again faced with the culmination of a historiographical mirage, which dates back to the end of the twentieth century⁴¹. In fact, a whole series of data lead us to classify these buildings as contemporary to the Roman presence in the region, as well as to assign them a more strictly civilian purpose (small spas or public baths), meaning they would also have been for collective use, an idea that was proposed some four decades ago⁴², and which has been subsequently corroborated⁴³.

In this context of ritual and social connotations, we should include a number of festive customs and manifestations, similar to the *ver sacrum*, whose peculiarities are described by

³⁷ RÍOS 2017; GARCÍA QUINTELA 2016.

³⁸ ALMAGRO GORBEA, MOLTÓ 1992; an example of one of them can be found in ALMAGRO GORBEA, ÁLVAREZ 1993; VILLA 2002.

³⁹ RÍOS 2000.

⁴⁰ VILLA 2010-2011.

⁴¹ RÍOS 2017.

⁴² SANTOS 1983.

⁴³ SANTOS 1996, 50; RÍOS 2017, 369.

other authors, such as Diodorus of Sicily, who refers to the Lusitanians, although in fact it may have been the Vettones who practised this custom, when he notes that⁴⁴:

ἴδιον δέ τι παρὰ τοῖς Ἰβηρσι καὶ μάλιστα παρὰ τοῖς Λυσιτανοῖς ἐπιτηδεύεται· τῶν γὰρ ἀκμαζόντων ταῖς ἡλικίαις οἱ μάλιστα ἀπορώτατοι ταῖς οὐσίαις, ῥώμη δὲ σώματος καὶ θράσει διαφέροντες, ἐφοδιάσαντες αὐτοὺς ἀλκῇ καὶ τοῖς ὅπλοις εἰς τὰς ὄρεινὰς δυσχωρίας ἀθροίζονται, συστήματα δὲ ποιήσαντες ἀξιόλογα κατατρέχουσι τὴν Ἰβηρίαν καὶ ληστεύοντες πλούτους ἀθροίζουσι (ed. Casevitz).

“The Iberians, and especially the Lusitanians, have a peculiar practice: when the young men come of age, those who are the poorest in wealth, but are noted for the vigour of their bodies and courage, procure for themselves courage and arms, and assemble on the mountainous escarpments, forming themselves into considerable bands; they make raids throughout Iberia and by their plunder accumulate wealth”.

This suggests that groups of young men of warrior age, at a particular time of the year (perhaps late spring), began to participate in these activities after leaving their homes to engage in robbery and plunder against neighbouring populations⁴⁵; we do not believe, however, that robbery and plundering (which would take place in communally owned wooded landscapes) were the direct objectives of these trials, but instead to demonstrate that they had the maturity (experience and strength) to withstand both inclement weather and to obtain the food necessary for their subsistence in extreme situations, including the defence of the settlement to which they belonged. Despite lacking any solid evidence indicating how long this activity lasted, we can estimate that it would have lasted for at least one week.

After passing this test, they would be received in the public square by the representatives of the socio-political power, and a feast would then be held in their honour, in which they would take part together with the rest of the village (men-warriors, the elderly, women and children), a moment in which the older people would surely play a predominant role in accordance with the social consideration to which they were entitled.

... καὶ παρὰ πότον ὀρχοῦνται πρὸς αὐλὸν καὶ σάλπιγγα χορεύοντες, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀναλλόμενοι καὶ ὀκλάζοντες ἐν Βαστητανίᾳ δὲ καὶ γυναῖκες ἀναμιξ ἀνδράσι προσαντιλαμβάνομεναι τῶν χειρῶν (ed. Radt)⁴⁶.

“And with the drink they dance in a circle to the sound of flute and trumpet, but they also jump and stoop; while in Bastetania the women also dance together with the men, and hold their hands.”

⁴⁴ DIODORUS OF SICILY 5.34.6.

⁴⁵ FLORUS 2.33.46; OROSIUS *Hist.* 6.21.2-3.

⁴⁶ STRABO 3.3.7.

In any case, these celebrations would contribute towards strengthening the bonds between all the components of the settlement; but within the framework of this traditional custom, identified with a feast in honour of the young men at the end of the ritual of passage to adulthood, at the moment of returning safe and sound to the settlement from which they had departed, would the ritual sacrifices mentioned by Strabo be celebrated, in the context of a popular commemoration?

The acceptance of the young men as full members and defenders of the village would require a commitment and oath (promise) from them to sanction their new situation; and that moment would not only entail the participation of the political and/or religious hierarchical representatives but also members of the community as guarantors.

It is possible that this manifestation of worship in the public square included a remembrance of the ancestors, in which case the severed heads (as a representation of them) would play a significant role, serving as a public recognition of the oldest members of the settlement, who would be replaced by the younger ones, who were then recognised as warriors to defend the settlement and its inhabitants (the community as a whole), and who could even have their own brotherhood⁴⁷. This passage to adulthood would probably take place at around 16-18 years of age, since at that time they would already be physically developed, especially if we take into account the cycle of their training, specifically involving wrestling and fighting on foot and on horseback⁴⁸, which would enable them to come of age within the framework of the settlement with the obligations inherent to their new rank.

If we take into account that, according to Strabo, among the religious-festive celebrations, the cult of an unnamed god of war stands out, known to the indigenous people of the north of the peninsula by various names (*Esus*, *Teutates* or *Taranis/Taranus*) and which we must identify with a warlike divinity, comparable to the Greek Ares or the Roman Mars⁴⁹, as well as the fact that the young men of the village had passed the initiation trials to become warriors, it is logical to suppose the association between both events, taking as an exponent the offering of bloody sacrifices, in which victims (goats and horses) would be immolated, and in very exceptional cases together with prisoners (or with their bodies replaced by human effigies made of stone or wood, although not identifiable as victims but in memory of the ancestors).

Through Strabo we also know of a series of practices related to training and the acquisition of physical skills in the framework of the hillfort enclosure, in which the youngest would endeavour to be trained as warriors; and from here we can consider that the integral education

⁴⁷ PERALTA 1990

⁴⁸ STRABO 3.3.6.

⁴⁹ The commentator of LUCAN (1, 444-446; USENER 1869, 32) equates these three gods with Mars, Mercury and Jupiter respectively, so are we faced with an indetermination of religious functions or a globalisation of them? In fact, they are similar to those described by Caesar for in Gaul (*Gall.* 6.17).

of these adolescents, in addition to overcoming the vicissitudes of their temporary stay in regions that were not controlled by their own centre of habitat, demonstrating their physical endurance in such difficulties, would involve a series of exercises to complete their "paramilitary" training in defence of the community (somewhat in the Spartan style, since neither in this nor in any other source is there any reference to literary instruction).

Conclusions

We therefore consider that Strabo's reference to human sacrifices is anachronistic and goes back to a descriptive line of authors that came before him. This fact is evident if we take into account that these are not exceptional cases related to warfare or examples of natural selection (due to physical deformity or other reasons) in the heart of each hillfort community in the northwestern part of Hispania.

In this sense, perhaps we can admit, at some earlier time, the barbarian practice of amputating the right hands of prisoners to consecrate them to the gods, as the Lusitanians were said to have done, although it is possible that this was a form of action that does not correspond to that time but to many decades earlier, given that the Bletonians were prohibited from carrying out these types of practices in the first decade of the first century B.C.E.

Moreover, in the framework of these manifestations we find the characteristics of an ancient festival, as the sacrifice of the victims would be followed by the celebration of a communal banquet of the slaughtered meat, involving all of the members of the community, together with dances and games of a religious nature.

Even in this context, it is possible to suppose the participation of symbolic representations of the gods to whom sacrifices were offered, despite the fact that their taboo status would prevent their physical presence in statues, which would lead to the existence among these communities of a religion described by Strabo as aniconic (as would happen with the Germans according to Tacitus⁵⁰)

The same should be said of the remembrance (memory), albeit of a symbolic nature, of the ancestors through these representations of heads (more than half a century ago Blázquez highlighted the funerary nature of these representations), as well as of some zoomorphs, and of what this presence meant in the framework of the development of events in the settlement.

We therefore believe that the allusion to the performance of ritual human sacrifices has much to do with Strabo's consideration throughout his work of the contrast between civilisation and barbarism, ascribing to the northern populations the characteristics that define the non-Roman world as opposed to the citizen (the three authors mentioned, in addition to their Greek origin, were immersed in the socio-cultural conditioning of the upper classes of the time).

⁵⁰ TACITUS *Germ.* 9.

We also consider that Strabo's statement, as well as being anachronistic, is simply a literary cliché, as is the case with many others that were passed down over the centuries in the Roman world. A similar example can be found with regard to gold mining in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula, which appears in the authors of the Late Empire (Claudian and Pachatus Drepanius). Their narratives are an echo of the past, since, in reality, they were written many decades after these activities had ceased to play a part in the economic context of the region⁵¹.

This reference to bloody sacrifices, as well as the assimilation made with the severed heads in the celebration of ritual human sacrifices, is not an adulteration of the account, but rather the possible attribution of practices, already obsolete at the time Strabo wrote his Geography, to the northern Hispanic populations in the framework of his global description, almost timeless and globalising, of their organisation, considering them to be barbarians.

In this regard, it should be borne in mind that these practices, which are far removed from the concept of Roman civilisation, are described, in the space of little more than half a century, by three authors of Greek origin, fully integrated into Roman society (Posidonius, Diodorus of Sicily and Strabo), and whose interests were centred on highlighting the barbaric traits represented by the populations of the northern Iberian peninsula, far removed from the characteristics that defined Roman citizenship.

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⁵¹ SANTOS 2021a.

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